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# ARCHIBALD MARSHALL: REALIST

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

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ON a mellow day in the early autumn of the year 1900, I sat on an old wooden bench in the open air with an English gentleman, and listened to his conversation with a mixture of curiosity and reverence. The place was one of the fairest counties of England, the town on the other side of a screen of trees was Dorchester, and my seat-mate was Thomas Hardy. I remember his saying without any additional emphasis than the actual weight of the words, that the basis of every novel should be a story. In considering this remark, which came, not from a doctrinaire, but from a master of long and triumphant experience, I could not help thinking that what seems axiomatic is often belied by the majority of instances. In the field of art, as in the field of religion, what ought to be seldom is. An honest critic, who should examine the total product of prose fiction for any given year in the twentieth century, might frequently fail to find any story at all.

As we look back over the history of the English novel, it appears that every permanent work of fiction has been a great story. *Robinson Crusoe*, *Clarissa*, *Tom Jones*, *Humphry Clinker*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Vanity Fair*, *David Copperfield*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Richard Feverel*, *The Return of the Native*, *Treasure Island*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, although they represent various shades of realism and romanticism, have all been primarily stories, in which we follow the fortunes of the chief actors with steady interest. These books owe their supremacy in fiction—at least, most of them do—to a combination of narrative, character, and style; and every one of them, if given in colloquial paraphrase to a group about a camp-fire, would be rewarded with attention.

In order to illustrate what I mean by a realistic novelist

whose happiest effects are gained by writing good stories with real characters, I know of no better choice among contemporaries than Archibald Marshall. Mr. Marshall is not a man of the highest original genius, which is all the better for my purposes, for original genius can and will go its own way, performing miracles that lie outside the scope of this essay. But Mr. Marshall is an admirable novelist and an artist of such dignity and refinement that only twice in his career has he written a novel that had for its main purpose something other than truth to life; in each of these two attempts the result was a failure.

I know how difficult it is to "recommend" novels to hungry readers, for I have written prescriptions for many kinds of mental trouble, yes, and for physical ailments as well. I know that *Treasure Island* cured me of an attack of tonsillitis and that *Queed* cured me of acute indigestion; but I have no assurance that other sufferers will find the same relief. Yet I have no hesitancy in recommending the stories of Archibald Marshall to any group of men or women or to any individual of mature growth. One scholar of sixty years of age told me that these novels had given him an entirely new zest in life; and I myself, who came upon them wholly without preliminary introductions, confidently affirm the same judgment. Of all the numerous persons that I have induced to read these books, I have met with only one skeptic; this was a shrewd, sharp-minded woman of eighty, who declared that she found them insupportably tame. I can understand this remark, for when girls reach the age of eighty they demand excitement.

Those who are admirers of Mr. Marshall's work will easily discover therein echoes of his own experience. He is an Englishman by birth and descent, familiar with both town and country. He was born on the 6th of September, 1866, and received in his home life and preliminary training plenty of material which appeared later in the novels. His father came from the city, like the father in *Abington Abbey*; he himself was graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, like the son of *Peter Binney*; it was intended but not destined that he should follow his father's business career, and he worked in a city office like the son of Armitage Brown; he went to Australia, like the hero's sister in *Many Junes*; he made two visits to America, but fortunately has not yet written an American novel; he studied theology with the inten-

tion of becoming a clergyman in the Church of England, like so many young men in his stories; in despair at finding a publisher for his work, he became a publisher himself, and issued his second novel, *The House of Merrilees*, which had as much success as it deserved; he tried journalism before and during the war; from 1913 to 1917 his home was in Switzerland; now he lives in a beautiful old English town, a place hallowed by many literary associations, Winchelsea, in Sussex.

In 1902 he was married and lived for some time in Beaulieu in the New Forest, faithfully portrayed in *Exton Manor*. He spent three happy years planning and making a garden, like the young man in *The Old Order Changeth*. Although his novels are filled with hunting and shooting, he is not much of a sportsman himself, being content only to observe. His favorite recreations are walking, reading, painting and piano-playing, and the out-door flavor of his books may in part be accounted for by the fact that much of his writing is done in the open air.

Like many another successful man of letters, his first step was a false start; for in 1899 he produced a novel called *Peter Binney, Undergraduate*, which has never been republished in America, and perhaps never will be. This is a topsy-turvy book, where an ignorant father insists on entering Cambridge with his son; and after many weary months of coaching, succeeds in getting his name on the books. The son is a steady-headed, unassuming boy, immensely popular with his mates; the father, determined to recapture his lost youth, disgraces his son and the college by riotous living, and is finally expelled. The only good things in the book are the excellent pictures of May Week and some snap-shots at college customs; but the object of the author is so evident and he has twisted reality so harshly in order to accomplish it, that we have merely a work of painful distortion.

For six years our novelist remained silent; and he never returned to the method of reversed dynamics until the year 1915, when he published *Upsidonia*, another glaring failure. Once again his purpose is all too clear; possibly irritated by the exaltation of slum stories and the depreciation of the characters of the well-to-do often insisted upon in such works, he wrote a satire in the manner of *Erewhon*, and called it a novel. Here poverty and dirt are regarded as the highest virtues, and the possession of wealth looked upon

as the sure and swift road to social ostracism. There is not a gleam of the author's true skill in this book, mainly because he is so bent on arguing his case that exaggeration triumphs rather too grossly over verisimilitude. He is, of course, trying to write nonsense; a mark that some authors have hit with deliberate aim, while perhaps more have attained the same result with less conscious intention. Now Mr. Marshall cannot write nonsense even when he tries; and failure in such an effort is particularly depressing. He is at his best when his art is restrained and delicate; in *Upsidonia* he drops the engraving-tool and wields a meat-axe. Let us do with *Peter Binney* and with *Upsidonia* what every other discriminating reader has done: let us try to forget them, remembering only that two failures in fifteen books is not a high proportion.

Of the remaining thirteen novels, two attained only a partial success; and the reason is interesting. These two are *The House of Merrilees* (1905) and *Many Junes* (1908). The realism of the former story is mixed with melodrama and mystery; these are, in the work of a true artist, dangerous allies, greater as liabilities than as assets. He has since happily forsaken artificially constructed mysteries for the deepest mystery of all—the human heart. In *Many Junes*, a story that will be reprinted in America in 1919, we have pictures of English country life of surpassing loveliness; we have an episode as warm and as fleeting as June itself; we have a faithful analysis of the soul of a strange and solitary man, damned from his birth by lack of decision. But the crisis in the tale is brought about by an accident so improbable that the reader refuses to believe it. The moment our author forsakes reality he is lost; it is as necessary for him to keep the truth as it was for Samson to keep his hair. Furthermore, this is the only one of Mr. Marshall's books that has a tragic close—and his art cannot flourish in tragedy, any more than a native of the tropics can live in Lapland. The bleak air of lost illusion and frustrated hope, in which the foremost living novelist, appropriately named, finds his soul's best climate, is not favorable to Archibald Marshall.

It was in the year 1906, and in the novel *Richard Baldock*, that he came into his own. This book, which will make its first American appearance next autumn, contains a story so absorbing that it is only in the retrospect that one realizes

the vitality of its characters and the delicacy of its art. There are no heroes and no villains. Every person has the taint that we all inherited from Adam, and every person has some reflection of the grace of God. There is no one who does not say something foolish or ill-considered; there is no one who does not say something wise. In other words there are no types, like "heavies," "juveniles," and "ingenues." As is the case in nearly all the novels by its author, we are constantly revising our opinions of the characters; and we revise them, not because the characters are untrue, but because we learn to know them better.

Every fine novel and every fine drama must, of course, illustrate the law of causation—the principle of sufficient reason. But characters that run in grooves are not human. In *Richard Baldock*, we have, as we so often have in the work of Archibald Marshall, strife between father and son—a kind of civil war. This war, like many others, is begotten of misunderstanding. There is not only the inevitable divergence between the older and the younger generation, there is the divergence between two powerful individualities. We at first sympathise wholly with the son. We say to ourselves that if any man is foolish enough to sacrifice all his joy in life to a narrow creed, why, after all, that is his affair; it is only when he attempts to impose this cheerless and barren austerity on others that we raise the flag of revolt. At the deathbed of the young mother, one of the most memorable scenes in our author's books, we are quite certain that we shall never forgive the inflexible bigot; this hatred for him is nourished when he attempts to crush the son as he did crush his wife. Yet, as the story develops, and we see more deeply into the hearts of all the characters, we understand how the chasm between father and son is finally crossed. It is crossed by the only durable bridge in the world—the bridge of love, which beareth all things.

In 1907 appeared one of the most characteristic of Mr. Marshall's novels, *Exton Manor*. It was naturally impossible for any well-read reviewer to miss the likeness to Anthony Trollope. If I believed in the transmigration of souls, I should believe that Archibald Marshall was a reincarnation of Trollope, and William De Morgan a reincarnation of Dickens. In an interesting preface written for the American edition, Mr. Marshall manfully says that he has not only tried to follow Anthony Trollope, "but the whole body of

English novelists of his date, who introduced you to a large number of people, and left you with the feeling that you knew them all intimately, and would have found yourself welcome in their society. That particular note of intimacy seems to be lacking in the fiction of the present day, and I should like to have it back."

To all those who have not yet read a single work by our author, I counsel them to begin with *The Squire's Daughter*, and then take up—with particular care to preserve the correct sequence—*The Eldest Son*, *The Honour of the Clintons*, *The Old Order Changeth*. These four stories deal with the family and family affairs of the Clintons, and together with a separate book, *The Greatest of These*, belong to Mr. Marshall's best period, the years from 1909 to 1915. When I say the "best period," I mean the most fruitful up to the present moment in 1918. He is still in the prime of life, and it is to be hoped that he may yet surpass himself; but since 1915, perhaps owing to the obsession of the war, he has not done so. *Watermeads* is a charming story, and in *Abington Abbey*, which now has an excellent sequel, *The Graftons*, he has introduced us to another interesting family; but none of these books reaches the level maintained by the Clinton tetralogy, nor penetrates so deeply into the springs of life and conduct as his most powerful work, *The Greatest of These*.

To read the Clinton stories is to be a welcome guest in a noble old English country house, to meet and to associate on terms of happy intimacy with delightful, well-bred, clear-minded men and women; to share the out-door life of healthful sport, and the pleasant conversation around the open fire; to sharpen one's observation of natural scenery in summer and in winter, and in this way to make a permanent addition to one's mental resources; to learn the significance of good manners, tact, modesty, kindly consideration, purity of heart—not by wearisome precepts, but by their flower and fruit in human action. To read these books is not to escape from life, it is to have it more abundantly.

If, as Bacon said, a man dies as often as he loses his friends, then he gains vitality by every additional friendship. To know the Clinton family and their acquaintances is not merely to be let into the inner circle of English country life, to discover for ourselves exactly what sort of people English country folk are, to understand what family tradition and

ownership of the land mean to them—it is to enlarge our own range of experience and to increase our own stock of permanent happiness, by adding to our mental life true friends—and friends that are always available.

Not since Fielding's Squire Western has there been a more vivid English country squire than Mr. Marshall's Squire Clinton. The difference between them is the difference between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. He is the man of the house, the head of the family, and it is not until we have read all four of the stories that we can obtain a complete view of his character. He is a living, breathing man, and we see the expression on his face, and hear the tones of his voice, which his daughters imitate so irresistibly. With all his pride and prejudice, with all his childish irritableness, he is the idol of the household. His skull is as thick as English oak, but he has a heart of gold. He is stupid, but never contemptible. And when the war with Germany breaks out in 1914, he rises to a magnificent climax in the altercation with Armitage Brown. We hear in his torrent of angry eloquence not merely the voice of one man, but the combined voices of all the generations that have made him what he is.

Yet while Mr. Marshall has made an outstanding and unforgettable figure of the fox-hunting Squire, it is in the portrayal of the women of the family that he shows his most delicate art. This is possibly because his skill as an artist is reinforced by a profound sympathy. The Squire is so obtuse that it has never dawned upon his mind that his wife is a thousand times cleverer than he, nor that her daily repression has in it anything savoring of tragedy. In the third book, *The Honour of the Clintons*, intense and prolonged suffering begins to sharpen his dull sight; and the scenes between the old pair are unspeakably tender and beautiful. Mr. Marshall never preaches, never tries to adorn the tale by pointing a moral. But the wild escapade of the daughter in the first of these stories, and the insistence of the mother on a superior education for the twins, exhibit more clearly than any letter to the *Times* could do, what the author thinks about the difference between the position women have held in English country homes and the position they ought to have.

Of all his characters, perhaps those that the reader will remember with the highest flood of happy recollection are



the twins, Joan and Nancy. In the first novel, this wonderful pair are aged thirteen; in the second, they are fifteen; in the third, they are twenty-one. Mr. Marshall is particularly skilful in the drawing of young girls. Whatever may be woman's place in the future, whatever she may drink or smoke or wear or say or do, there is one kind of girl that can never become unattractive; and the Clinton twins illustrate that kind. They are healthy, modest, quick-witted, affectionate, high-spirited; when they come in laughing and glowing from a game of tennis, and take their places at the family tea-table, they bring the very breath of life into the room.

In *The Eldest Son*, which, of the four delightful books dealing with the Clinton family, I find most delightful, there is a suggestion of the author's attitude toward humanity in the procession of candidates for governess that passes before the penetrating eyes of Mrs. Clinton. Her love for the old Starling—one of the most original of Mr. Marshall's creations—has not blinded Mrs. Clinton to the latter's incompetence for the task of training so alert a pair as the twins. Of all the women who present themselves for this difficult position, not one is wholly desirable; and it is plain that Mrs. Clinton knows in advance that this will be the case. She is not looking for an ideal teacher, for such curiosities are not to be found on our planet; the main requisite is brains, and she selects finally the candidate whom many society women could immediately dismiss as impossible, the uncompromising, hard-headed, sexless Miss Phipps, who has about as much amenity as a steam-roller. Miss Phipps bristles with faults; but they are the faults that spring from excess of energy, from a devotion to scholarship so exclusive that the minor graces and minor pleasures of life have received in her daily scheme even less than their due. But the twins already possess everything lacking in the composition of their teacher; what they need is not a sweet, sympathetic companion: what they need is what nearly every one needs, mental discipline, mental training, and an increase in knowledge and ideas. In this dress-parade of candidates we have a miniature parade of humanity in the large; no one is faultless; but those who have an honest mind and an honest character have something essential. And who knows but what the shrewd and deep-hearted Mrs. Clinton did not also see that in the association of this mirthless female with two young

incarnations of vitality and vivacity, both parties to the contract might learn something of value? Miss Phipps is about to discover that the countryside in winter has resources entirely unguessed at by her bookish soul; that there are many of her countrymen and countrywomen who find in outdoor sport a secret of health and happiness. When she looks out of the window at the departing riders and hounds, she learns, in the words of our novelist:

All this concourse of apparently well-to-do and completely leisured people going seriously about a business so remote from any of the interests in life that she had known struck her as entirely strange and inexplicable. She might have been in the midst of some odd rites in an unexplored land. The very look of the country in its winter dress was strange to her, for she was a lifelong Londoner, and the country to her only meant a place where one spent summer holidays.

I am aware that the most insulting epithet that can be applied to a book, or a play, or a human being is the word "Puritan"; and I remember reading a review somewhere of *Abington Abbey* which commented rather satirically on the interview between Grafton and Lassigny, and most satirically of all on the conclusion of the interview, which left the stiff, prejudiced, puritanical British parent in possession of the field. But once more, Mr. Marshall is not trying to prove a thesis; he is representing the Englishman and the Frenchman in a hot debate, where neither is right and neither is wrong, but where each is partly right and partly wrong. Each says in the heat of the contest something injudicious, even as men do when they are angry. But when Lassigny literally takes French leave, we do not care who has scored the most points; the real winner is the one who is not present—the girl herself. For when two men fight about a woman, as they do somewhere every day, the truly important question is not, which man wins? The only real question is, does the woman win? It is perhaps better to win by a quarrel than to win the quarrel.

In the novel *The Greatest of These*, which is in some respects the most ambitious and the most effective of all its author's works, we have an illustration of his favorite method of portraying the shade and shine of human character by placing in opposition and later in conjunction two leading lights of two large classes of nominal Christians—a clergyman of the Church of England and a minister of the Dissenters. The novel begins on a note of sordid tragedy, as

unusual in the books of Mr. Marshall as a picture like the Price household is in the work of Jane Austen; here it serves to present the forthright and rather self-satisfied Anglican, who little dreams of his approaching humiliation; he is brought into conflict with a lay Zeal-of-the-land Busy, whose aggressive self-righteousness is to be softened by the very man whom he looked for to strengthen it. Here too, as in *Exton Manor*, we come as near as we ever come in Mr. Marshall's books to meeting a villain—in each case it is a woman with a serpent's tongue. Every page that we turn in this extraordinary book lessens the distance not merely in time but in sympathy between the two leading characters; the evangelical Dissenting preacher is drawn with just the sympathy one would superficially not expect from a man of Mr. Marshall's birth, breeding, and environment. He is in some ways the author's greatest achievement; whilst his less admirable wife is so perfect a representative of the busy city pastor's helpmate that we can only wonder how it is possible to put on paper any creation so absolutely real. There is not one false touch in this picture. William Allingham wrote in his diary after reading one of Browning's poems, "Bravo, Browning!" Upon finishing this story which I do not fear to call a great novel, I could hardly refrain from a shout of applause.

Mr. Marshall is a twentieth century novelist, because he is happily yet alive, and because he writes of twentieth century scenes and characters; but he is apart from the main currents of twentieth century fiction, standing indeed in the midst of the stream like a commemorative pillar to Victorian art. He has never written historical romance, which dominated the novel at the beginning of our century; he has never written the "life" novel—beginning with the hero's birth and traveling with plotless chronology, the type most in favour since the year 1906; he has never written a treatise and called it a novel, as so many of his contemporaries have done. Every one of his novels, except the two unfortunate burlesques, is a good story, with a good plot and living characters; and he has chosen to write about well-bred people, because those are the people he knows best.

I call him a realistic novelist, because his realism is of the highest and most convincing kind—it constantly reminds us of reality. So far as Mr. Marshall's Victorian reticence on questions of sex is concerned, this strengthens his right to

the title Realist. As Henry James said, the moment you insist that animalism must have its place in works of art, there almost always seems to be no place for anything else. If a novelist is to represent real life, he must make subordinate and incidental what in a novel like *Bel-Ami* dominates every page.

Archibald Marshall is a realist. He represents cultivated men and women as we saw them yesterday, as we shall see them tomorrow. He seldom disappoints us, for among all living novelists, while he is not the greatest, he is the most reliable.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS.